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Chinese Aid to the Afghan Insurgents: Why So Little

There are a number of reasons why Beijing, despite its claims to the contrary, might not now be willing to make a serious effort to aid the insurgents:

- Beijing may be disinclined to make a major effort in the absence of a greater effort on the part of the West. China confronts the Soviets directly along its own border and indirectly in Southeast Asia and may not wish to lead the effort in Afghanistan and risk yet another confrontation with Moscow in Southwest Asia. Heavy involvement with the resistance now could also retard China's effort to improve ties with India, a major goal.
- Beijing may also believe that, on the one hand, its own resources do not allow a larger effort, and, on the other, the insurgents are not capable of effectively utilizing anything more than small arms anyway. Some Chinese officials have criticized the insurgents as disorganized and unsophisticated.
- It is conceivable China never intended to do more than it is at present. In Beijing's view of "labor sharing" with the West in the global anti-Soviet struggle, China's main effort should be in Southeast Asia. Because of its strained military resources, geographic limitations, and, perhaps, because of Islamabad's failure to cooperate, China may have decided that the task of thwarting the Soviets in Afghanistan belonged to the West and countries of Southwest Asia. Its own frequent expressions of support for the insurgents and assertions that it is rendering aid are thus tactics meant to arouse more tangible support from other sources.

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- The Chinese have been discouraged by Pakistan's reluctance to assist them in aiding the insurgents. [REDACTED]

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The Pakistanis, however, have recently claimed that they are willing to cooperate with China in aiding the insurgents.

- China lacks an easy direct supply route to the insurgents. The Chinese-Afghan border is extremely rugged and the main trail through the region (the Wakhan Corridor) passes close to Russian border posts. Undetected use of this route would be difficult, if not impossible, and the trail seems ill-suited for the transport of significant amounts of arms.

Comment

On balance Beijing may have been willing initially to make a significant effort to aid the rebels on the assumption that it would do so in cooperation with Pakistan and the West. After signs that Pakistan and the West did not respond as forcefully as hoped, China may have embarked on a small scale program to support groups in the northeast, perhaps by sending supplies through the Wakhan corridor or northern Pakistan. Now, with some experience in aiding the insurgents, Beijing may have concluded that the risks involved in a more ambitious program outweigh the potential benefits.

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The attached, prepared by [redacted]
(China analyst, OPA), is in response to
your question at the end of the Afghan
meeting a few days ago.

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Date 2 July 1980

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J⁴ Afghan pels